Standing on the Sidelines

At middle school in Pike County everyone seemed to look up to the cheerleaders; they were popular and outgoing, they were everything I wasn’t. So, naturally, I wanted to be one. When cheerleading tryouts were announced at lunch, the room filled with excited whispers. Almost all of the girls in the dining hall rushed to sign the bright yellow sheet of paper that Coach Allgood had just taped to the wall that signified one would be at tryouts. The girls at my table stayed seated. They really disliked cheerleaders. I had no idea why, but they made sure that everyone knew how they felt about them. Kayla, Elizabeth, and Lauren, who were my best friends at the time, made remarks about how dumb the girls were and said that they were probably all awful people. Instinctually, I wanted to stay seated and not even sign-up, but I knew I would regret it. Slowly standing up, I walked to sign my name.

I was filled with regret as soon as my pen touched the paper. The yellow sheet seemed to grow brighter and brighter, as if it was warning me that I was making a bad decision. It felt like everyone in the lunchroom was staring at me, and silently making fun of my decision. With my head hanging low, I walked back to the table. Never have I wanted to disappear that badly. Elizabeth looked at me with disdain as I took my seat. She didn’t say a word to me, and neither did anyone else at the table. Our lunches were finished in silence. Kayla, Elizabeth, and Lauren all thought cheerleading was pointless. They were soccer players, so they often mocked cheerleading and said it wasn’t a sport. Many girls at school tried out but my friends all thought they were too good to do so. As soon as I wrote my name on the sign-up sheet they saw me as someone who wasn’t good enough to be around them.

During Mrs. Osbolt’s Literature class, many kids questioned me about why I signed up. Multiple people told me I would never make it because I wasn’t popular enough. Desperately, I tried to ignore them, but it never worked. My only desire from that point on was to prove them wrong. Much to my chagrin, the group of friends I normally hung out with at school avoided me the rest of the day. The more I tried to talk to them the worse the situation became.

Over the next few days, the situation remained the same. As each day passed I hoped the next would be better, but I was let down time and time again. Those couple of days felt like a year. But as the week came to a close, I tried to be optimistic that my friends could have a change of heart. Hopefully the weekend would provide a much needed break as well as an opportunity for my friends to realize that they were hurting me. Somewhere deep inside me I knew the reality of that happening was almost non-existent.

Throughout the weekend I could not help but think about my friends and how they were feeling. I tried to remain busy but despite my best effort, I could not shake the feeling of dread. Tryouts were Monday and I spent most of the weekend practicing for them, but every time I tried to do so I thought about what my friends would think. Internal confliction consumed me. With the excitement of tryouts also came the shame my friends had poured upon me. Like a toddler waiting for Christmas, my anticipation had reached a crescendo as the weekend came to a close.

Waking up that Monday morning my emotions were wreaking havoc on my psyche. Preparing for a day full of judgment was nearly impossible. Not only was there the concern about the coaches judging me, I also had to endure the stress, however self-inflicted, about what my peers were going to say to me as well. Walking into school and finding my friends was very simple. They had congregated in the same spot they always did in the gym but my seat had been given away to a girl who was in our science class. Lauren quickly glanced at me but looked away just as fast. Luckily, I did not have to endure standing alone for long because the bell rang and we were dismissed for our first class of the day. Schoolwork was my main focus as I tried to hide my disappointment in my friends throughout the day. During lunch a girl invited me to sit with her and some other students in our algebra class. Her name was Alex and she told me that she was planning on trying out for cheerleading and that many of her peers had made fun of her for that reason also. She promised to keep me company that afternoon at tryouts.

As the day concluded, my friends never came around. Tryouts began immediately after school and I met a few really great people. The tryouts lasted all week and I hardly missed the girls I used to consider my friends. At the end of tryouts on Friday, Coach Allgood announced the girls names that made the Pike County Middle School cheerleading squad. I was elated when my name was called. Alex’s name was called right after mine so we celebrated together. Making the cheerleading squad was one of the proudest moments I had ever experienced. Six years later, I am still a cheerleader. Cheerleading makes me feel proud of myself and it makes me feel like I am worth something.

In the end, Kayla, Elizabeth, and Lauren helped me realize that the approval I was craving was something I did not need nor was it something I was going to receive. The situation made me recognize that being an outsider can lead one’s self to great opportunities. I have made some of my best friends through cheerleading, and I always feel like I am part of a family when I am on the field with my team.